

**Statement of Victoria Christiansen, Interim Chief of the USDA Forest Service  
Before the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources  
Concerning President's Fiscal Year 2019 Proposed Budget  
For the USDA Forest Service  
April 24, 2018, 10:00 a.m.**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me here today to testify on the President's FY 2019 Budget request for the Forest Service. I appreciate the support this Committee has shown for the Forest Service in the past. I look forward to working with you to improve conditions on National Forest System lands so they provide—today and tomorrow—for the uses, experiences and services that meet the needs of our Nation.

I am especially appreciative of the solution to our fire funding dilemma. It's a challenge we have struggled with and worked on together for well over a decade. In FY 2020, this comprehensive fire funding fix will ultimately stabilize our operating environment by addressing the rising suppression budget and treating catastrophic wildfires as disasters. You have dramatically reduced the need for transferring funds from our other mission programs so we can cover firefighting costs. You have approved the use of new tools and expanded authorities to help us do more to improve the conditions of our forests and grasslands. These actions signal a significant change for us; it will not be business as usual. We will step up to this challenge and also do our part as an agency. We are already developing more efficient and effective ways to do our work while taking steps to contain fire costs and ensuring we spend dollars in the right places to make a difference. We expect to demonstrate this commitment as we confront the 2018 fire season. Moreover, we have embarked on other internal reforms, especially in active forest management, that will result in changing overly complex, time-consuming, outdated processes that delay our work on the ground. Coupled with the expanded authorities you have approved, these reforms will translate to more results, production and work in our nation's forests.

The 2019 President's Budget for Forest Service totals nearly \$5.17 billion. Of that, \$405 million is mandatory funding. It is a good investment for the American people; we will work to make good on it. The funding and related work will support between 340,000 and 370,000 jobs and contribute more than \$30 billion in Gross Domestic Product. Through the use of tools like the Good Neighbor Authority, with more than 127 agreements in 33 states, 20-year stewardship contracts with cancellation ceiling relief, and other internal process improvements like environmental analysis decision-making (EADM), the Forest Service will move forward to sell 3.7 billion board feet of timber while improving the resiliency and health of more than 3.4 million acres of National Forest System lands through removal of hazardous fuels and stand treatments.

Meanwhile, the agency continues our work on other reforms. We continue our progress to strengthen internal controls by implementing policies and procedures that reinforce administrative control of funds, better management of prior year unobligated balances, and quarterly review of unliquidated obligations. An effort is also underway to evaluate the Forest Service's budget structure compared to other agencies. The goal is to produce a FY 2020 budget within a new, streamlined structure that will facilitate better transparency about how the agency allocates funds to direct and indirect costs and eliminate cost pools.

We recognize, however, our successful delivery of services and work starts with a highly skilled, motivated workforce. Forest Service employees remain our largest and most important investment. They are essential to confronting the arduous challenges facing America's forests and grasslands. They are integral to the services and experiences we provide to citizens and local communities. Recently, we have faced hard truths about continued allegations of harassment and retaliation that remain within our agency. Though difficult to hear and watch, these important stories reveal unacceptable behavior that must—and will—end in this agency. Looking at this agency, I see strong, courageous and forward-thinking people willing to stand up for their colleagues and themselves. Please know I stand with them. We will match the urgency of this situation with focused actions and sustained commitment; I commit to hold everyone accountable for their behavior and we will continue to take meaningful steps that will result in a permanent change to our culture. We cannot achieve the important work of our mission without the safe, rewarding, respectful, harassment free environment each of our employees deserves and the American people expect of their Government.

### **The President's 2019 Budget**

The FY 2019 request focuses on: wildfire response; active forest management; and acquiring knowledge to better manage forests. To address these focus areas, the Budget makes key investments in the following program areas:

- \$1.34 billion is proposed for Fire Preparedness, which enables the Forest Service to maintain its existing firefighting capability and funds all base 8 salary costs for firefighters.
- Fire Preparedness aviation investments support the agency's goal of providing a safe and effective fire response.
  - The USDA Forest Service seeks the support of the appropriate Congressional committees to terminate the agency-owned HC-130H program in 2019.
- \$1.165 billion is proposed for Suppression which fully funds the rolling 10-year average expenditures for Suppression.
  - The 10-year average increased \$108 million from the FY 2018 President's request.
- \$390 million is proposed for Hazardous Fuels, which supports the agency's emphasis on improving the condition of the Nation's forests and grasslands while enhancing their resilience to the negative effects of wildland fire.
- \$341 million is proposed for Forest Products which will support the sale of 3.7 billion board feet of timber. The Forest Service is working to improve the speed and agility in the planning and execution of land management actions including timber sales.
  - Timber sales are an important tool for accomplishing resource management objectives in an ecologically and economically efficient manner while generating revenue to offset implementation costs, support jobs and bolster economies.
- \$75 million is proposed for the Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) Program, which generates data on past, current, and projected tree inventories for all 50 states. The FIA program enables the FS and others in the natural resource community to understand the magnitude of changes in forest conditions and trends, and to make projections of future conditions - information which is vital to the long-term health of forests and the sustained availability of multiple uses from forests.

- FIA leverages one partner dollar for every six Federal dollars spent, and provides current and historical information that informs forest management planning across the country.

### **Legislative Proposals**

The FY 2019 President's Budget proposes several key legislative changes to improve our effectiveness in delivering programs and services:

- **Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act Reauthorization (FLREA):** The proposal is to reauthorize the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act through September 30, 2021. This is an interagency proposal with the Department of the Interior. An interagency working group developed specific, mutually agreed upon language changes to the authority. The Triennial Report to Congress on Implementation of FLREA, published in May 2012, contained a number of "Considerations for the Future of the Program" which set the foundation for the interagency proposal.
- **Forest Service Facility Realignment and Enhancement Act of 2005 (FSFREA):** The agency is requesting reauthorization for one year, until September 30, 2019. This would allow the Secretary to continue to convey administrative sites that the Forest Service no longer needs, and retain the proceeds from the sales for the acquisition, improvement, maintenance, reconstruction, or construction of facilities.
- **Small Tracts Act:** The 1983 Small Tracts Act authorizes the Secretary to dispose of up to 40 acres of National Forest System (NFS) land by sale or exchange. This proposal would increase the minimum value of the land that could be conveyed from \$150,000 to \$500,000 to better align with current land values.
- **Grazing Permits:** The proposal would provide an amendment to the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) to correct the National Defense Appropriations Act (NDAA) amendment to FLPMA Section 402. For this section only, all National Forest System lands would be included so that those lands in eastern States and National Grasslands are covered by the NDAA and are treated equally in National Environmental Policy Act analysis of grazing permits.
- **Direct Hire Authority:** The Forest Service is seeking Direct Hire Authority for Resource Assistant Interns who have successfully completed the newly implemented Resource Assistant Program. The Program is designed to attract recent graduates of institutions of higher education with particular emphasis on ensuring full representation of women and participants from historically Black, Hispanic, and Native American schools, or other schools with diverse student populations. This authority will enable the Forest Service to directly hire, without competition, eligible resource assistants who have successfully completed a minimum of 960 hours on a Forest Service unit and have at least an Associate degree.
- **Wild and Scenic Rivers:** This proposal would change the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act to state that the Secretary of Agriculture shall not be considered to be in violation of Section

3(d)(1) of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act solely because more than three years have passed since a river was designated “wild and scenic,” and a comprehensive river management plan has not yet been completed. If more than three years have passed since designation without the completion of a comprehensive river management plan, the proposal would require that a plan must be completed or appropriately updated no later than during the next forest plan revision process.

Our FY 19 Budget request focuses on the stewardship of our natural resources, and the more effective and efficient delivery of forest and rangeland products and services. It requires tough choices within our existing program of work and progress to better contain costs and account for our spending. I look forward to working with this Committee to fulfill the President’s goals and our key responsibilities for the long-term benefit of the Nation’s forests and grasslands and for all Americans. I will be glad to answer your questions.